

Sri Lanka on the road back to civil war

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Less than two months after the presidential election, Sri Lanka is slipping towards civil war. Escalating violence has been accompanied by widespread repression by the Sri Lankan security forces against the country's Tamil minority, as well as Sinhala chauvinist agitation by President Mahinda Rajapakse's allies—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU).

In December alone, some 90 deaths were reported. These included 46 military personnel killed in a series of ambushes, 10 Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) members murdered in unexplained circumstances, and several members of paramilitaries connected to the security forces as well as a number of innocent civilians. This deadly toll has continued unabated in January, with new deaths reported virtually every day.

Over the past two years, there have been killings and reprisals between the LTTE and a breakaway faction led by V. Muralitharan, also known as Karuna, but the violence was mainly confined to eastern Sri Lanka. Now the violence has spread to the northern province, particularly on the Jaffna peninsula, and has all the signs of being the prelude to all-out war.

Hagrup Haukland, head of the Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission (SLMM) that oversees the ceasefire, ominously declared on December 29: "In not so many words, if this trend of violence is allowed to continue, war may not be far away." He called on both sides to halt the escalation of violence. Despite strong international pressure for the Rajapakse government and the LTTE to return to the negotiating table, there are no signs of talks and no let up in the killings.

There is little doubt that the LTTE is responsible for a recent spate of ambushes that have killed army and navy personnel. But the key factor in the rising tensions is the role of the armed forces. Hostile from the outset to the 2002 ceasefire, the Norwegian-led SLMM and the "peace-process," sections of the military top brass sided with the previous president, Chandrika Kumaratunga, in a series of provocative naval incidents that cut across and helped stymie peace talks in 2003.

With the election of Rajapakse, the military has become increasingly brazen, using its extensive powers under the present state of emergency to intimidate and terrorise the Tamil population. Over the last month, the army and police have conducted a series of extensive sweeps in the Jaffna peninsula. WSWs correspondents in the area report that parents are terrified to allow their children onto the streets. Soldiers and police have fired on two demonstrations called to protest against the excesses of the military.

The most recent search operations on the Jaffna peninsula took place at Koay, Elavalai and Jaffna town last Saturday. A number of young people were detained and interrogated before being later released. On Monday, soldiers were seen patrolling in Jaffna town with black cloth around their heads in the form of a mask to intimidate the local population.

The security forces also conducted a huge pre-dawn search in

predominantly Tamil areas of Colombo on Saturday, involving more than 4,000 soldiers and policemen. Nearly 1,000 people, mainly youth, were detained and severely interrogated—53 were held until the end of the day and five were detailed as "LTTE suspects". This operation, the third in Colombo, is reminiscent of the methods in force prior to the ceasefire, which, among its provisions, permitted the LTTE to conduct political activities throughout the island.

These search operations are, however, just the most overt of the military's activities. The armed forces collaborate with a number of anti-LTTE paramilitary outfits, including the Karuna faction. Immediately after breaking with the LTTE in 2004, Karuna and other faction members were brought to Colombo, accommodated in a military safe house and held discussions with military intelligence. The armed forces have doubtless assisted the group in murdering LTTE cadre as a means of weakening the LTTE's position in the East.

The military may well have had a hand in the murder of Tamil National Alliance (TNA) parliamentarian Joseph Pararajasingham by unidentified gunmen during a church service in Batticaloa on December 24. A previously unknown group calling itself the Sennan Brigade of the Eastern Soil claimed responsibility, declaring that Pararajasingham had been killed "for his treachery to our Eastern people and its soil". The TNA has functioned as the parliamentary mouthpiece for the LTTE.

The military's Joint Operations Headquarters (JOH) issued a statement declaring: "Pararajasingham was brutally gunned down by LTTE pistol men." Even the government's own Information Department did not make such a claim and announced that an investigation had been ordered. In his "Situation Report" in last weekend's *Sunday Times*, Iqbal Athas, well known for his close connections to the military hierarchy, noted that there was no evidence of any LTTE involvement, adding: "It seemed there were two governments."

On the face of it, the military's claim is absurd. Pararajasingham was openly pro-LTTE. His body was taken to LTTE-controlled territory, LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran attended the funeral and the title of Mamanithar was conferred on him. The obvious purpose of the crude attempt to blame the LTTE is to deflect attention from the military and its own armed allies in the East. Pararajasingham's assassination has further heightened tensions in the North and East, provoking large protests in major towns.

The killings have continued unabated. On Monday, the killing of five students in the eastern port of Trincomalee provoked further demonstrations. The military falsely claimed that the five had died when accidentally detonating a grenade they were trying to throw at a group of soldiers. An eyewitness, however, told a magistrate's inquiry that the students had been detained and shot. Bullets were found in the bodies. SLMM spokesperson Helen Olafsdottir described the killings

as “resembling executions”.

On Tuesday, LTTE political wing district leader Jeyanthan and another LTTE member were killed by a claymore mine blast while riding a motorbike in LTTE-controlled territory. The LTTE blamed the murder on the military’s long-range special units, which prior to the ceasefire killed a number of LTTE officials, including a prominent leader, deep inside LTTE areas. The military is yet to deny the charge.

One of Rajapakse’s first actions on assuming the presidency was to appoint General Sarath Fonseka as the new head of the army. Fonseka, who has a reputation as a military hardliner, has wasted no time in publicly demanding that the government adopt an aggressive stance toward the LTTE.

In an interview with the *Sunday Observer* on January 1, Fonseka said the military wanted a large number of amendments to the ceasefire, amounting to a complete rewrite. “The LTTE got the agreement drafted the way they wanted. We made a mistake by signing it,” he complained. He also ruled out negotiations with the LTTE, saying there was not a “proper environment for that”.

Fonseka’s comments are a further indication that the military is increasingly acting as an independent political force, defending its own interests. In the course of the brutal 20-year war, the armed forces have been expanded to become one of the largest in the region on a per capita basis. The officer caste, which is deeply imbued with Sinhala chauvinism, is hostile to any compromise with the LTTE or concessions to the democratic rights of the Tamil minority. With Rajapakse as president and defence minister, the military hierarchy feels it can act with impunity.

Since coming to office, Rajapakse has come under considerable pressure to return to peace talks. The major powers, including the US, the EU and Japan, have reiterated that financial aid for Sri Lanka will be tied to progress in the so-called peace process. The president’s efforts to enlist the more active involvement and support of India have been rebuffed.

Rajapakse also needs to maintain the support of his chauvinist allies. His weak minority government depends on the parliamentary support of the JVP and JHU, which are deeply hostile to the peace process. As part of his electoral deal with these parties, Rajapakse agreed to end an agreement with the LTTE for the joint distribution of tsunami aid, to insist on the revision of the ceasefire and not to agree to any peace deal based on a federated state. The JVP and JHU also want an end to Norway’s role as facilitator of the peace process.

While concerned to maintain the support of the major powers, Rajapakse’s concessions to the peace process have to date been largely cosmetic. He has declared that he will maintain the ceasefire and has invited Norway to continue as facilitator. Proposals for negotiations have bogged down in disagreements over where they would be held. Even if talks are finally held, it is difficult to know what would be discussed, much less agreed on.

Along with the military, the JVP and JHU are also heightening tensions. On December 29, the JVP MP Jayantha Wijesekara took part in a provocative demonstration in Trincomalee organised by the Eastern People’s Organisation, a Sinhala chauvinist outfit. The slogans condemned “SLMM bias” in favour of the “Tigers” and called for the ceasefire—“the UNP pact that betrays the country”—to be torn up. Wijesekara told the gathering that because the president did not obey “the Tigers,” they were killing “patriots”.

The fact that the island is once again heading towards war is an indictment not simply of Rajapakse, but of the entire political establishment. Incapable of resolving any of the pressing social needs

of the masses, all of the major bourgeois parties rely on whipping up communal divisions to divide working people and shore up their rule. The presidential election revealed widespread popular discontent over the failure to assist tsunami victims, growing unemployment and rising prices, particularly of fuel and transport.

Like his main rival Ranil Wickremesinghe, Rajapakse based his election campaign on a long list of promises which he cannot possibly meet. As a result, with the assistance of his chauvinist allies, he is inflaming communal sentiment and, in doing so, setting the country on the road to war.

The LTTE, which represents the interests of the Tamil bourgeoisie, is also based on communalism. Having been pressured to the negotiating table by the major powers in 2002, it has gained nothing from the peace process. In the first round of talks, the LTTE formally abandoned its longstanding demand for a separate Tamil statelet in the North and East and offered to work in partnership with the Colombo government to establish a “Tiger economy”—i.e., a cheap labour platform for foreign investors.

The peace talks, however, broke down in April 2003 and have been stalled ever since. Like Rajapakse, the LTTE leadership faces growing opposition and hostility from the Tamil masses over its failure to lift living standards, and its anti-democratic methods of rule. Its response is to whip up anti-Sinhala sentiment and promote itself as the defender of Tamils by answering the Sri Lankan military in kind.

Two days ago, following a meeting with the Catholic Church leaders, LTTE political wing leader S. P. Thamilchelvan gave an indication of the pressures that the LTTE leadership is under. “People are frustrated and dejected by the government’s lack of action during the last three years of peace to bring normalcy to the northeast,” he declared. The frustration is not just with the government, however, but, as Thamilchelvan knows, with the LTTE as well.

In the course of the presidential election campaign, the Socialist Equality Party and its candidate Wije Dias repeatedly warned of the dangers of a slide back to war. Dias insisted that working people had to break politically with all the factions of the ruling class, which were organically incapable of resolving the bloody 20-year conflict on a progressive basis. The SEP called for the building of an independent political movement of workers—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—to advance its own class solution to the war and to build a society based on socialist lines to meet the social needs and democratic aspirations of all.

The SEP fights for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all military forces from the north and east as part of the struggle for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam and the broader socialist transformation of South Asia and internationally. The SEP calls for the convening of a genuine Constituent Assembly, elected openly and democratically, to draw up a new constitution to end all forms of discrimination and establish democratic rights for all.

The recent events have made clear that the task of building an independent movement of the working class based on this program is a matter of urgent necessity to prevent the plunge back to war.



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